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Published online: 07 Sep 2023.

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Family purpose: an empirical investigation of collective purpose

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ABSTRACT

Individual purpose is associated with positive outcomes. Collective purpose, or an enduring intention shared among members of a group for how they seek to contribute to the world beyond their group, may be similarly beneficial. Collective purposes stand to benefit the groups that pursue them as well as the communities that groups find purpose in serving. Despite this, limited research has explored collective purposes. As an instance of collective purpose, the present study explored family purpose. Interviews were conducted with members ($N = 87$) of 25 families. Findings suggest family purposes exist, they take varied forms based on the target of family members' shared commitments, and several factors support their pursuit, including shared moral and/or civic virtues, cohesive family structures, family purpose champions, foundational religious beliefs, humble leaders, and shared family identities. Implications of these findings, both for the study of family purpose in particular and collective purposes more generally, are addressed.

The presence of individual purpose, or an enduring commitment to contributing to the broader world in a personally meaningful way (Damon et al., 2003), is associated with a host of positive developmental outcomes. Compared to others, individuals with purpose report better physical health, including fewer sleep disturbances (Kim et al., 2015), less chronic pain (Smith et al., 2009), and greater longevity (Hill & Turiano, 2014). They also report enhanced psychological well-being, including more hope (Bronk et al., 2009; Wnuk et al., 2012), enhanced life satisfaction (Bonebright et al., 2000; Bronk et al., 2009), and greater positive affect (Hill et al., 2022).

To date, however, research on purpose has focused almost exclusively on *individuals*' purposes in life. Limited research has considered the role of collective purpose, or an on-going intention shared among members of a group for how they seek to contribute to the world beyond their group, even though collective purpose may particularly beneficial. Collective purposes stand to benefit the individuals and groups that pursue them as well as the communities that groups find purpose in serving.

At the organizational level, some have argued that collective or shared purposes may serve as powerful drivers of organizational performance by providing motivation and direction for group members (Adler & Heckscher, 2018), and empirical research finds that groups with shared beliefs, an important dimension of collective purpose, tend to be highly cohesive (Carron et al., 2003). Other research finds that members of organizations who find their work meaningful, another important component of collective purpose, are more committed to their organizations (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). Leaders often report working hard to instill a shared vision – a possible indicator of shared purpose – among followers to enhance their groups' performance (Adnan & Valliappan, 2019). Still others have proposed that common purpose, or a deeply held sense of common destiny or calling, binds members of an organization together and is often the reason that attracts people to the organization's work, be that organization a business, non-profit, community initiative, or social movement (Hickman & Sorenson, 2014). Taken together, research clearly suggests that collective purposes are likely to benefit both the groups that pursue them and the communities and causes these groups find purpose in supporting. Despite this, research on collective purpose has been limited. The present study sought to explore the existence, forms, and supports for a particular form of collective purpose.

As an instantiation of collective purpose, we chose to investigate shared purposes among extended families. All people are members of families, and families play a significant role in shaping individual development. Through interviews with members of families, the present study sought to explore (1) the extent to which family purposes exist, (2) the varieties of family purpose, and (3) the family characteristics and practices that support the development and maintenance of shared purpose.

Family purpose

Based on a literature review and pilot interviews, we proposed a definition of family purpose that builds on the widely-studied construct of individual purpose (Bronk, 2013; Damon et al., 2003). Family purpose refers to *an active and sustained commitment shared among multigenerational family members for the way they want to use the family's collective resources to contribute to the broader world* (Bronk, 2022). Five dimensions of this definition are important to highlight. First, the pursuit of shared, family purpose represents a *long-term intention*. Although a family's purpose is likely to evolve over time, it manifests as a thread of consistent focus and vision that extends across time and generations. Second, a family purpose is *meaningful* to members of the family. In fact, it is so important to family members that they actively engage in making progress toward it. A family purpose is an *ongoing, lived commitment* rather than something family members merely contemplate or discuss. Third, a family's purpose is reflected in its history, present activities, and intentions for the future. This means that a family's purpose is more than an aspirational vision; rather, it is *consistent with the family's actions in the past, in the present, and in its forward-looking aims*. Fourth, a family purpose is shared by members of the intergenerational family network. This does not mean that every family member necessarily supports the purpose – in large extended families with 100 or even 1,000 members this would be unlikely – but it does mean that *most members recognize the aim as significant and meaningful to the family*. Finally, a family purpose is *oriented toward a cause beyond the family*. Working together toward a meaningful aim in service of people or causes outside the family provides positive motivation and inspiration. When all these elements are present, we speak of *family purpose*.

To further clarify the family purpose construct, it is helpful to demonstrate how it differs from related constructs. Although family purpose may take the form of philanthropic giving, it is not the same thing as philanthropy. Philanthropy refers to giving financial assets and in-kind material contributions and giving one's time, through volunteer or service work (Schervish, 2014). Families may find shared purpose in supporting organizations or causes they care about (e.g. educational causes, environmental causes, social justice causes), but this represents only one venue for purposeful action. Families may also find purpose in volunteering in their communities or working together to support social or political change. These examples of family purposes do not represent philanthropic endeavors. In short, *some* forms of family purpose may overlap with *some* forms of philanthropy, but others may not.

Similarly, family purpose is not the same thing as shared family values. Shared values can link family members together (Weine et al., 2006). A common treatment of values proposes they represent 'guiding principles in the life of a person or group' (Schwartz et al., 2012, p. 664). Applying this definition to a family suggests that a family's values refer to the principles that guide their behavior, decision-making, and interactions with one another and with the broader world. Shared family values may stem from shared religious, spiritual, or cultural beliefs. Conceptually, family purposes and family values overlap. They share an enduring focus on the things that matter most to the family. However, they also differ in important ways. A family that values equity may choose to support access to education for all young people. In this example, a family's values provide the *why* (because the family values equity) for the *what* of the family's purpose (supporting educational opportunities for all young people). A family's shared values may provide the motivation for a family's purpose.

Families with shared enterprises

The family purpose construct, as conceptualized here, has not been studied empirically prior to this study. Consequently, there was no way to know its prevalence nor, indeed, whether it even existed. To maximize our chances of finding families with collective, multigenerational purposes, we chose to investigate the construct among a sample of families with shared enterprises, including families with family businesses, family foundations, and family offices. These families seemed particularly likely to demonstrate family purposes since, for several reasons, they are particularly likely to benefit from shared purposes. Families with shared enterprises often refer to the value they place on shared commitments and purposes that enhance the long-term stability and positive social impact of their shared enterprises (e.g. Harland, 2022). Some families have collective enterprises that are themselves purpose-driven, such as non-profit organizations (Quinn & Thakor, 2019; Rey et al.,

2019), and families with for-profit businesses have opportunities to have significant impacts on the broader world (Schervish, 2014). In addition, a small but growing body of theoretical and applied literature points to the promise of family purpose among families with shared enterprises (Jaffe, 2020; Jaffe & Lane, 2004; Ward, 1997). Practitioners have proposed that identifying a shared purpose may provide business families with a reason to stay close (Jaffe & Lane, 2004), and others have suggested that shared purposes, adopted by successive generations, are fundamental to the profitability and overall success of multigenerational family enterprises (EY, 2020; Harland, 2022). In short, family purposes are likely to be particularly valuable to families with shared enterprises. Therefore, we expected that if any families developed shared purposes, it was likely to be these families. For that reason, the present study focused on a nominated sample of families with shared enterprises.

Current study

The present study focused on shared family purposes as one important form of collective purpose. To maximize the likelihood of finding families with shared purposes, we recruited families with shared enterprises, which were nominated as likely to exhibit shared purpose. The study was designed to yield a description of shared family purpose, its varieties, and the factors that appear to support the development of shared family purposes.

Methods

Given the dearth of existing theory and data on the family purpose construct, we conducted a qualitative study (protocol #3179, exempted by the Claremont Graduate University's Institutional Review Board) that relied on semi-structured interviews and systematic qualitative analyses of those interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fletcher et al., 2016). Interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2021, primarily via Zoom.

Sample

The sample included 87 members of 25 multigenerational, extended families (12 North American and 13 European families) with family enterprises (e.g. family business, family non-profit or foundation, family office). Family enterprises varied in function and size. For instance, one family had owned and operated a small-town newspaper for several generations; another had owned and operated a multinational distribution company for more than one hundred years.

Our sample was bi-modal in nature; slightly less than half the participants represented middle-income families with small to medium-sized family enterprises, and slightly more than half represented ultra-high net worth (UHNW) families with large, usually international, family enterprises. A few fell somewhere in between. Including UHNW families in our sample was intentional; given the global nature of their organizations, these families have the potential to do great good or cause significant harm. Some scholars have referred to UHNW families as having 'the capacity to exercise ... hyperagency' (Schervish & Herman, 1988, p. 32). Table 1 includes more information about participating families, with some details changed to protect participants' privacy.

Within each family, we strategically selected information-rich participants to interview, those we expected would have the most insight into the family's purpose (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This included family leaders whenever possible (e.g. founders or current leaders of the business or other enterprise) and others core to the functioning of the family and its shared enterprise. In most cases, at least three individuals across three or more generations participated in interviews. In a few cases, only two individuals drawn from two different generations were interviewed. To identify participants, we asked family business advisors to nominate families that had a shared enterprise, had owned or operated the enterprise for at least two generations, and had been recognized as having a shared commitment to contributing to the world beyond the family.

Interview protocol and procedure

Interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol featuring questions about family communication and culture, shared family values and goals, intergenerational functioning, and other family characteristics. Some questions were inspired by the Family Circumplex Model surveys (Michael-Tsabari & Lavee, 2012; Olson, 2011). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted via Zoom. They lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, and de-identified. Participants were offered small tokens of gratitude for their participation (e.g. $100 or gift basket equivalent to $100).

Analysis

We coded the interviews three times to address our three guiding questions. In each case, the family represented the unit of analysis. To address the first research question—*do family purposes exist*– we looked within

Table 1. Demographic information.

Family number	Number of family members interviewed	De-identified description of participating family
1	4	A third generation UHNW French family that founded and operates an international fashion business.
2	3	A third generation Canadian family that founded and operates a local newspaper.
3	5	A seventh generation real estate family that helped build and continues to help support a mid-sized city in the UK.
4	4	A sixth generation family with a large, international manufacturing and materials business.
5	3	Third generation family owners of a Scottish golf club and resort.
6	3	A fifth generation US family of Protestant ministers.
7	3	A third generation farming family in the US midwest.
8	4	A fourth generation Swiss family with a large family foundation.
9	3	A fourth generation Canadian family with a large multinational distribution company.
10	3	A second generation UK family that founded and runs a non-profit that supports after-school arts programming for youth from low-income backgrounds.
11	6	A philanthropic third generation German family that founded and operates a tech company.
12	3	A second generation US family that founded and operates a non-profit that provides job training programs for urban youth.
13	3	A second generation French family with a family-owned and -operated appliance store.
14	3	A sixth generation German family that founded and operates an electrical construction equipment rental company.
15	4	A second generation, family-owned health services company based in the US that provides care for people in need.
16	3	A second generation Dutch family with a small farm utilizing environmental sustainability practices.
17	5	A fourth generation Italian family with a family founded and operated textile business.
18	2	A third generation UHNW family of US real estate developers.
19	4	A fourth generation German family with a private construction business.
20	3	Second generation owners of a family business that produces paper and agricultural products.
21	3	Fourth generation Spanish family that founded and operates a measurement technology business. This Spanish family also oversees an active family foundation.
22	3	A sixth generation British family that founded and owns one of the oldest private banks in the country.
23	3	A seventh generation UHNW real estate family in Canada with a large family foundation that supports green building initiatives.
24	3	A fifth generation US family that founded and operates a private bank.
25	4	A fifth generation US family with a large holding company that oversees several large retail and consumer products companies.

each family for evidence of the five dimensions of family purpose that make up our definition of the construct (Bronk, 2022). We coded families based on the extent (high or low) to which they demonstrated: (1) A collective, long-term intention to progress toward a shared aim; (2) a willingness to invest time, energy, and other resources in making progress toward this shared aim; (3) a commitment to the shared aim evident in the family's plans for the future as well as its actions in the past and present; (4) an enacted intention to contribute to issues, causes, or groups beyond the family; and (5) a contributory intention shared among extended family members. Two members of the research team read and coded 25% of the transcripts together to establish an inter-rater reliability coefficient (Cohen's Kappa coefficient = .90, which demonstrates 'strong to almost perfect' interrater reliability; Hugh, 2012). These two coders divvied up the rest of the transcripts and coded them independently.

To address the second and third research questions—*what do family purposes look like*, and *what supports for family purpose exist*—we included families that demonstrated a clear family purpose in the first round of coding, and we conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis approach commonly used in studies of individual purpose (e.g. Bronk et al., 2020; Liang et al., 2017). To

thematically analyze our dataset, members of our research team first read through the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data. Next, they coded transcripts, one family at a time, to identify themes that emerged both within and across families. Based on the emergent themes, coders generated, defined, and reviewed codes to ensure they best described the data. Then two members of the research team independently coded each of the transcripts using the codes established in the prior phase. They met to compare emergent themes, and when differences arose, they discussed them until a consensus was reached (Hill et al., 2005).

Findings

The present study sought to identify the extent to which family purposes exist, the varieties of family purpose, and the supports for family purpose. With regard to our first question—*to what extent do shared purposes exist among families with shared enterprises*– we found that family purposes exist, but they are rare. Even among our nominated sample, only slightly less than half the families demonstrated a clear family purpose. On our second question—*what varieties of family purpose exist*—we determined that families find purpose in taking responsibility for the way they run their shared enterprises, in taking responsibility for their customers,

and in taking responsibility for some aspect of the broader world. Finally, with regard to our third question—*what features support the development of family purposes*—we found that a commitment to shared moral virtues, family cohesion, family purpose champions, religious beliefs, humble leaders, and strong family identities are core to the development and maintenance of family purposes. Each of these findings is discussed in greater detail below.

Do families with shared purpose exist?

Coding yielded four mutually exclusive statuses of family purpose. Families that met all five criteria were categorized as demonstrating 'clear family purpose', meaning they recognized a shared goal of contributing to some aspect of the world beyond their family, they were engaged in working toward that goal, and they had been doing so for at least two generations. Almost half the families (12 of the 25 families) in our sample were coded as having a *clear family purpose*.

A sixth generation UHNW Canadian family of real estate developers provided an illustrative example of clear family purpose. In addition to running their real estate business, the family also oversaw a large family foundation. According to family members who worked in the family business, the family's shared purpose centered on 'being a force for good'. This purpose guided the way they ran their business and their family foundation. More specifically, the family sought to run its business in a highly ethical manner and to consistently and generously engage in charitable giving. Their giving often dovetailed with their business aims, such as their generous support for 'green' building practices. Giving was a core component of the family's shared purpose, and it had been since the company's inception. 'Our founders . . . started through their business to do good. That's also how an important part of our mission and purpose—[of] being a force for good – was introduced'. Family members approached their shared aims with flexibility, adjusting the family's philanthropic focus based on current events, societal needs, and family members' interests. Most recently, inspired by members of the younger generation, the family decided to focus its philanthropic activities on green building practices.

Other families in our sample met some, but not all, the criteria for family purpose. They were categorized into other family purpose statuses, including (1) 'budding family purpose' (6 of 25 families demonstrated a shared concern that extended beyond the family and was characterized by high active engagement, but the shared intention was relatively new and was endorsed only by members of the younger generations); (2) 'fading family purpose' (2 of 25 families demonstrated a shared concern that extended beyond the family and was characterized by broad buy-in and high active engagement but endorsed only by members of the

Table 2. Varieties of family purpose.

Clear Family Purpose	Budding Family Purpose	Fading Family Purpose	No family purpose
12 of 25 families	6 of 25 families	2 of 25 families	5 of 25 families
A member of a fifth generation US family with a large holding company talked about her family's purpose: *'So when I say creating for people, it's all businesses related to taking care of a family growing up. So this family needs to eat, this family needs to get medical care, and this family needs a house, needs a shelter'.*	A member of a third generation UHNW French family that runs an international fashion business expressed an interest in growing the family's commitment to shared purpose in the future: *'[My] hope that in the future, now that [my children have] had this experience, they'll go on and do this for themselves, as they grow older'.*	A third generation member of a Scottish family that owned and operated a golf club and resort noted that at one time the glof club had had a strong philanthropic mission but not any more: *"In [my father's] mind, he does it for the charity aspect of it 'cause he really loves giving, but he also sees it as a business aspect. You're gonna get all these people playing in this tournament. When they're here playing the tournament, they're gonna be in the bar having drinks, they're gonna be eating food, they're gonna be golfing".*	A member of a sixth generation British family, which owned a private bank, talked about the pride he felt around the longevity of the bank and the family's ownership, but he did not talk about a shared commitment to contributing to the broader world: *'[We're proud of] being the successors to one of the oldest private banks in [the UK]. That's probably the pride of it, and everyone in the family has a certain task'.*
The founder of a second generation family-owned health services company based in the US said, *'[For] my business . . . it is important that it does a positive service for society'.*	A member of a fourth generation Canadian family, who was enrolled in school and interning with the family business, discussed his support for his family's budding family purpose: *'I went to school to prove to myself that business could be a force for good . . . . And so, for the whole program, I would write all my papers about how corporations can be a force for good'.*	A sixth generation member of a family with a large, international manufacturing and materials business said about the family's waning commitment to giving back: *'If you ask me, "Why are we seeing this breakdown?" It is because we stopped investing in managing the family'.*	Members of an Italian family with a textile business expressed pride in the family's cohesion, but not about the family's shared commitment to issues beyond the family: *'The whole family still holds together well––there are no extreme quarrels . . . . It is still an intact, large family'.*

older generations); and (3) 'no purpose' (5 of 25 families – despite having been nominated – did not exhibit a shared commitment to acting in the world beyond the family). Table 2 includes the number of families that demonstrated each of the varieties of family purposes and illustrative quotations for each variety.

What do family purposes look like?

Having established that some families in the sample exhibited clear family purpose, we re-analyzed the data from those families to gain a clearer sense of what those family purposes looked like. We discovered that purposes were differentiated by the target of intergenerational family members' sense of responsibility (Gardner, 2007). Families took responsibility for different entities. Some revealed a shared purpose based on taking responsibility for the ethical way their organizations were run (6 of 12 families). These families were committed to providing good jobs for people who needed them, and they often made an intentional effort to share profits with employees and to avoid laying them off, even during COVID. For some, purpose involved taking responsibility for customers or end-users (6 of 12 families). These families demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to serving their customers. One family talked about how they prayed for the people they served on a regular basis. In addition to taking responsibility for employees and customers, nearly all the families' purposes also felt a strong responsibility to care for some aspect of the broader world (11 of 12 families). All but one family found purpose in more than one of these aims, meaning they demonstrated up to two variants of shared family purpose. Table 2 includes the number of purposeful families that demonstrated each variety of family purpose and illustrative quotations for each variety.

One of the families in our sample that found purpose in taking responsibility for an aspect of the broader world was a fourth-generation Swiss family with a large family foundation. The founder's commitment to serving and improving the world guided the Foundation's direction and inspired the family's shared purpose. Before she died, the founder noted, 'I wanted to make my life useful. I wanted to find out what God wanted me to do . . . . I always liked the idea that everyone should try to leave the world a better place than they found it'. Shaped by the founder's vision, the family foundation supported efforts aimed at improving the human condition. It is noteworthy that the founder viewed her foundation 'as a service, not as a way to help [himself]', and her great granddaughter similarly described his family's shared

purpose as one guided by a desire to be of 'service' to the broader world. The great granddaughter was inspired by his family's commitment to improving the broader world, and she hoped to work in the family foundation when she was old enough. 'The work that my family does with the [family foundation], and all the other charitable organizations, I find that really appealing . . . . I want to continue that legacy'. Taking responsibility for an issue in the broader world was the most common manifestation of family purpose to emerge among the families with shared purpose in our sample.

How are family purposes supported across generations?

Having established that family purposes existed in our sample and that they could take a variety of forms, we sought to understand the features that supported their development and maintenance. Themes emerged in the interviews that pointed to factors that nurtured shared family purposes. Here we outline the themes that emerged across *most* (at least 7 of the 12 families with clear purpose). Table 3 includes the number of families that demonstrated each of these purpose-supports and illustrative quotations for each one.

Members of participating families with clear purpose told us their members shared a commitment to moral and/or civic virtues. Moral virtues describe good neighbors (e.g. trustworthiness, kindness, compassion, etc.) and civic virtues describe good citizens (e.g. respect, community-mindedness, etc.; Seider, 2012). Among the families in our study, shared moral and civic virtues provided the impetus and drive for the pursuit of collective, family purpose. For instance, owners of a healthcare company said they wanted to start a socially minded business so that they could 'do something precise, concise, and focused, and make something better out of it. Because if everybody thinks like that, there's one grain [of sand] and another grain, and we can form beaches'. The family's shared commitment to a core set of moral virtues underscored their desire to use their family business to contribute to the care of people in need. They viewed their business as a vehicle for doing good in the broader world.

In addition to sharing moral and/or civic virtues, family cohesion emerged as another noteworthy feature of all but one of the families with purpose in our sample. Closeness among family members meant there existed a bond that brought members together, and it made possible the development and maintenance of a shared purpose. In these families, closeness among family members fostered engagement with shared, purposeful aims

Table 3. Supports for family purpose.

Commitment to moral and or civic values	Cohesive families	Family purpose champions	Humble leaders	Religious roots	Strong family identity
12 of 12 families	11 of 12 families	9 of 12 families	9 of 12 families	8 of 12 families	7 of 12 families
A member of a fifth-generation US family with a large holding company that oversees several large retail and consumer products companies said, 'My ancestors were really focused on doing the right thing socially and from a business point of view. But there was this social responsibility at the really beginning ... I think that's what differentiated the family because it stated strong values at the beginning of the story, and out of whose values, we're making decision today, and they are still inspiring us – very strong social values'.	A member of a fourth-generation Swiss family with a large family foundation said, 'People stayed at each other's home and had an affinity of early bonding with cousins and because these siblings, (wife) and her siblings, get together four times a year to talk about these things and then tell their children about it and there's an engagement between the generations and also inter-generational .... [Family members] are very cohesive and quite loving toward each other'.	The purpose champion in a third-generation farming family in the US midwest shared his family's purpose: 'From our core values, which I read to you, we came up with the purpose of our business of being agriculturally diverse, environmental stewardship, economic stimulation, stewards of the land .... So it just helps you focus on why you're making the decisions and where you want to head when making your decisions. What's your purpose?'	A member of a fifth-generation US family with a large holding company that oversees several large retail and consumer products companies noted, 'It's more the younger generations within our family that are aware [of environmental issues] and that are demanding and requesting changes on the subject .... So now the people, the managers are understanding that it's very important'.	A member of a second-generation UK family that founded a non-profit that supports after-school arts programming shared, 'We grew up in the church, and [my grandmother] took those principles of helping your neighbor. Those are deeply embedded in us, in our life, and we just – If we see somebody that needs something and we got it, we gotta share it, that's just the way we were raised'.	A member of a seventh-generation real estate family, that helped build and continues to help support a mid-sized city in the UK said, 'He also is the family historian ... He's very interested in this history – in preserving the history, and he's done a lot of research on the family and to the family origins .... We have them tracked back to the 1300s .... He's done a lot ... looking up the graves, the places people worked, researching the history of the family, and he continues that interest very strongly'.

and the motivation to persist in pursuit of these aims. A fifth-generation UK family of Christian ministers provides an illustrative example of what cohesion looked like and how it supported the family's shared purpose. Members of the extended family of ministers demonstrated a clear purpose aimed at living out their religious beliefs. Although they did not share a traditional family enterprise, they referred to the ministry as the 'family business'. Intentional efforts to maintain their closeness – including regular family reunions, family phone calls, and living close to one another – helped them coalesce around the pastoral profession and related ways of living out their faith.

Most families in our sample also identified purpose champions, or individuals who promoted the family's shared purpose. Family purpose champions clearly articulated the family's shared purpose, they strongly supported it, and they encouraged others to do the same. Having a family purpose champion ensured that purpose remained in the front of family members' minds and that it guided their decision making and directed their activities.

Most families also pointed to their family's religious roots as being important for the development and maintenance of their shared family purpose. Religious convictions – often espoused by the founder – provided the initial drive and shared framework for many of the family's shared purposes. Typical of other families in our sample, a second-generation US family that founded

a non-profit providing after-school job training to urban youth from low-income backgrounds described their organization as one that was 'built on biblical principles'. Religious beliefs provided an important foundation and shared touchstone for many of the family purposes that emerged. Shared religious beliefs served to unite family members around their shared purpose.

Humble leaders were yet another consistent feature of families with shared purpose. According to Schein and Schein (2018), humble leadership is tied to an intimate, trusting, and open culture built on relationships. Humble leaders respect the input and direction that other members offer, and they are essential to the support of shared purpose, especially across generations. 'Humble leadership concerns itself with creating the culture that makes purposeful forward movement sustainable as the world of work evolves' (Schein & Schein, 2018, p. xi).

Finally, most of the purposeful families in our sample told us they had a strong sense of family identity and that sense of family identity contributed to their shared family purpose. Families with purpose knew who they were and what they stood for. In many cases, they had family historians who wrote extensively about the family's founder. These stories served to bring families together and to connect them to both the shared family identity and purpose. They provided a unifying picture of who the family was in the past and who they were expected to be in the future. Members of a fourth-generation Swiss family with a large family foundation

talked about how important it was to uphold the family name and identity.

> [Family members] also believe in the accomplishment of the [Family] Foundation as an expression of all of their heritage . . . . They want to make sure that the family's name is always kept high and that's the foundation that holds that together.

Family identity emerged as a particularly important feature of larger families, with a longer history of being in business together. Smaller families that had not been in business together long were less likely to recount a sense of shared family identity. These families – often second and third generation families – did not need stories of family founders since they tended to know these individuals and played a key role in these stories.

Discussion

Researchers have established that individual purpose benefits people and the communities that are the recipients of purposeful action in varied and important ways (see Pfund & Hill, 2018), but what about collective purpose? Research consistently suggests that collective purposes are likely to benefit the groups that pursue them and the communities groups choose to support (Adler & Heckscher, 2018; Adnan & Valliappan, 2019; Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Carron et al., 2003). Despite this, research on collective purpose, or an enduring intention shared among members of a group for the way they seek to contribute to the world beyond their group, has been limited. As an instance of collective purpose, family purposes were investigated in the present study. This study sought to determine (1) if family purposes existed, and if they did exist, (2) what they looked like, and (3) how they were supported.

About half the families in our nominated sample demonstrated clear signs of a family purpose. Across generations, members of these families developed and pursued a shared focus around how they sought to contribute to the broader world. Another quarter of the sample demonstrated budding family purpose, meaning shared purpose was evident among younger but not older family members, and a couple families demonstrated fading family purpose, meaning shared purpose was evident among older but not younger family members. Still other families in our sample, one in five, demonstrated no signs of collective family purpose. Although some members of these families were committed to contributing to the broader world in their own ways, they lacked a shared approach for doing so.

Findings around the existence of family purpose have implications for both predictions about the prevalence of family purpose in the general population and interventions designed to encourage family purpose formation. With regard to the prevalence of the construct, our findings suggest that shared family purposes are likely to be rare in representative samples of families. To be included in our study, families had to demonstrate a consistent commitment to contributing to the world beyond the family that was strong enough that individuals outside the family – namely members of our nomination team – would recognize it. Even in this nominated sample, less than half of the families demonstrated all the criteria for family purpose.

Our findings point to different strategies families may need to employ to develop family purposes. Families with fading purpose should strive to improve communication between members of the older and younger generations, and families without purpose might benefit from conversations designed to help them identify a shared target for their contributory activities. Building stronger, more active intergenerational learning communities within the family would likely support the development of family purpose.

Only those families that demonstrated shared purpose were included in subsequent analyses. Among those families, three varieties of family purpose emerged. Most commonly, families in our sample found purpose in taking responsibility for an issue, cause, or group beyond the family. Members of these families pooled resources generated by the family business and collectively engaged in philanthropic giving or came together to address a societal problem. Half these families also found purpose in taking responsibility for customers or stakeholders, and the other almost half found purpose in taking responsibility for the way their organizations were run.

Identifying forms of shared purpose has important theoretical as well as practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, identifying forms of shared purpose sheds light on the nature of the family purpose construct: Taking shared responsibility for a particular group or cause appears to be central to the pursuit of family purpose. From a practical perspective, identifying forms of family purpose offers potentially useful language for family's striving to identify a shared purpose. Encouraging family members to reflect on the issues, groups, and causes for which they feel responsible could offer a useful way of launching a family purpose conversation.

Finally, we sought to identify factors that supported the pursuit of family purpose. One factor that emerged across all purposeful families was a commitment to

shared moral and/or civic virtues. An individual's commitment to virtuous action is core to individual purpose (Damon, 2008), so it makes sense that a family's shared commitment to a set of moral and/civic virtues is similarly core to family purpose.

Cohesion within the family also appeared to nurture the development of family purpose (Jaskiewicz & Dyer, 2017; Olson et al., 1983). Cultivating cohesive relationships required time and effort on the part of family members. This was especially true in large, extended families, some of which had dozens of living members. Members of these families recognized that family ties were fragile and that without an intentional effort to build cohesion, families could drift apart. As a result, these families planned annual get-togethers that featured get-to-know-you and bonding activities. They developed rituals that welcomed new family members and traditions that marked the coming of age of younger family members. In a host of ways, purposeful families were intentional about their desire to stay close.

Family purpose champions, or individuals who represented the family purpose and who encouraged others to do the same, also emerged as important individuals who supported the development of family purpose. Family purpose champions tended to be particularly committed to the beyond-the-family dimension of the family's shared purpose.

Members of purposeful families also told us that humble leaders played an important role in supporting their family's purpose. Humble leaders solicited input from a range of family members about the family's shared aims (Schein & Schein, 2018), and their presence reflected a recognition that individuals cannot take full credit for their success, that they should be grateful for their good fortune, and that their families are no better (or worse) than others. Interestingly, especially among the wealthy families, humble leaders often served as spokespeople for the importance of not flaunting wealth or power.

Interviews also revealed that family purposes often have religious roots. In many cases, family members shared deeply held faith-based beliefs about how family members should behave. Over time, mirroring trends in North America and Europe, many younger family members have drifted away from their family's religious moorings, but the family purposes that stemmed from these religious foundations have endured (Lambert, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2015). Many of the founders in our sample identified as religious, and the shared framework of religious beliefs served as an organizing feature that helped connect family members to the family's shared purpose. Religious beliefs provided a shared touchpoint that united family members around

a common understanding of the family's responsibility to the broader world. The ways of thinking about the family's principles, commitments, values, and purposes were framed in terms of beliefs, assumptions, and moral truths that derived from those religious bases.

Lastly, families with purpose also pointed to strong family identities as important supports for their shared purposes. An unanticipated number of the families in our sample, including both UHNW and more typical families, had official or unofficial family historians. These individuals wrote about the founder and the founding of the shared enterprise. In so doing, they tended to prioritize the family's shared purpose, and these shared family histories served to bring family members together around a shared experience and a shared vision for their role in society.

These factors supported the development and maintenance of family purpose on their own and through interactions with one another. For instance, as noted above, a strong sense of family identity and family cohesion both served to support the development of family purpose on their own. However, in most cases these factors appeared together, and in those cases, they supported one another. Cohesive families were both more likely to develop purpose and a shared sense of family identity. Humble leaders, who listened to and valued input from all family members, were likely to support family cohesion, and purpose champions were likely to build a strong sense of family identity as they rallied family members around a shared commitment. Similarly, religious roots often provided the foundation for the shared moral and civic virtues that emerged among purposeful families. Shared religious beliefs, as others have argued (Schnitker et al., 2019), offer a transcendent narrative that supports the pursuit of virtue development and goal-directed purpose. Similarly, shared religious beliefs often bring people together and facilitate family cohesion (VanderWeele, 2017). In short, the factors that supported family purpose did so both on their own and through interactions with other factors supportive of family purpose.

Implications for collective purpose

In addition to illuminating the nature of family purpose, the present study also has important implications for how we conceptualize collective purposes more generally. Collective purpose is an umbrella term that applies to many forms of shared purpose, including purposes shared among family members, purposes shared among members of an organization, purposes shared among religious individuals, and purposes shared among members of a political movement. Collective purposes are on-

going. Rather than representing a short-term aim or objective, collective purposes are enduring; they represent a stable source of motivation. They inspire members of the group to act in their pursuit. Collective purpose is more than a mere statement about a group's mission, vision, or aims. Instead, it is something members of the group recognize and actively support. Finally, and importantly, collective purpose aims at something beyond the group. It represents a commitment to accomplishing something in the broader world. Although others have considered the role a common aim may play in the success and motivation of an organization (e.g. Baur et al., 2016; Hickman & Sorenson, 2014; Northouse, 2007), few have conceptualized collective purposes as having the beyond-the-group component. However, this component is critical to the potential community and societal benefits of collective purpose.

Findings from the present study of family purpose point to some likely features of collective purpose. For instance, just as family purposes are rare, we would expect to find that at least some other forms of collective purpose are similarly rare. For instance, organizations with shared purpose are likely to be rare since it is likely to be difficult to motivate members of large organizations to contribute to common aims beyond the organization. However, collective purposes may be more prevalent among other groups. For instance, religious organizations and political movements are likely to be built around shared aims. As such, we would expect these groups to be more inclined to exhibit collective purpose.

By nature, collective purposes are stable; they endure over time. However, to remain relevant amidst changing social conditions, they also need to evolve. Finding mechanisms to support both stability and change in a family's purpose was a challenge for many of the families we interviewed. We expect this will present a challenge for groups trying to sustain other forms of long-term, collective purpose, as well. Groups will need to find ways to maintain the core of their purpose while also allowing it to morph with the changing times. Humble leaders (Schein & Schein, 2018) are likely to facilitate this delicate and dynamic balance. Families with purpose in our sample tended to be led by open-minded, genuinely curious individuals who valued input from all members, including members of the younger generations. In one family, members of the older generation went to work with members of the younger generation to better understand their daily lives and larger concerns. Practices like this that connect members across generations are likely to ensure the longevity of other forms of collective purpose as well.

In addition to humble leaders, other supports for family purpose are also likely to be important to the development and maintenance of other forms of collective purpose. For instance, group cohesion is likely to represent an essential ingredient in collective purpose. Political groups or congregations, for instance, comprised of individuals who get along well and who feel emotionally close to one another, are more likely to agree on a set of shared beliefs and commitments (Jaskiewicz & Dyer, 2017; Olson et al., 1983). In the absence of cohesion, these groups can splinter or disintegrate. However, building a cohesive climate requires an on-going commitment. Families in our sample, especially larger ones, dedicated substantial time and effort to developing and maintaining cohesion, and we expect groups seeking to cultivate other forms of collective purpose will need to do the same. Interestingly, cohesion is not only a likely pre-requisite for collective purpose, but it is also likely an outcome. Groups that work together toward a common and meaningful cause are likely to grow close.

Purpose champions may be essential supports for other forms of collective purpose. It is inevitable that some members of a large group will feel more connected to the collective purpose than others. However, maintaining a collective purpose year after year and even decade after decade, will likely require at least a few members who champion the shared purpose. As they did in families with purpose, these individuals are likely to find inspiration in the beyond-the-group component of the shared commitment, and they are likely to play a key role in connecting members of the group to that inspiring activity.

Common and meaningful religious beliefs offered families a shared language and belief system that helped keep family members aligned around their shared, family purpose. However, other than religious groups, most groups are unlikely to have shared religious beliefs. These groups will need to identify other shared values, virtues, or beliefs that bind them. The lack of shared religious convictions could present a challenge to secular groups seeking to establish collective purpose; however, our sample included some non-religious families with purpose, and we expect secular groups will find ways of establishing collective purposes as well. These groups will need to find other inspiring moral and/or civic virtues to undergird their collective purpose.

Future directions

This study focused on shared family purpose as one instance of the larger category of collective purposes. Findings shed light on and raise questions about the study of both family purposes in particular and other forms of collective purpose more generally. For instance, how do groups balance personal and collective purposes? In some cases, individual members of a group may find a personally meaningful sense of direction in the group's shared purpose, but in others, individual members may have personal purposes that are only loosely related or even unrelated to the group's shared purpose. How can groups navigate this in a way that supports both personal and collective aims?

Collective purposes are likely to motivate groups to achieve, to provide members with a meaningful sense of direction, to unite group members, to support performance, and to provide a meaningful direction that helps members feel more committed to the group (Adler & Heckscher, 2018; Adnan & Valliappan, 2019, Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Carron et al., 2003). Future research should empirically investigate the benefits of different forms of collective purpose. For instance, what benefits do organizations realize? Sports teams? Political groups? If those benefits are significant enough, future research should also explore strategies designed to cultivate collective purposes. In addition to investigating the effects of shared purpose on groups, it makes sense to study the effects of shared purpose on the individual members of a group. Does collective purpose inspire individual purpose? Does it make individuals feel constrained? Findings from the present study offer a useful starting point for this line of work.

In sum, the present study represents an important exploration into the potentially fruitful topic of collective purpose. Beyond the specific findings generated, the present study introduced an important working definition of family purpose, one that we hope will be referenced by family members as well as by scholars interested in studying family purpose and other forms of collective purpose. In addition, the present study suggested that family purposes exist, but they are rare, and that family purposes take various forms, depending on the group for which a family feels responsible. Finally, findings point to important supports for the development and maintenance of family purpose – and likely other forms of collective purpose – including shared moral and/or civic virtues, cohesive family structures, family purpose champions, humble leaders, religious roots, and strong family identities. We hope these findings serve to stimulate research into family purpose in particular and collective purpose more generally.

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Data availability

The data will be made available upon request by contacting the corresponding author

Open scholarship

This article has earned the Center for Open Science badge for Open Materials. The materials are openly accessible at https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2023.2254738

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